

# THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

## Wounded Healer February 20, 2000 John M. Buchanan

"Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'you are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you,' and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later . . . We cannot force ourselves to accept ourselves. But sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say 'yes' to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate and self-contempt disappear, and that our self is reunited with itself. Then we can say that grace has come upon us." (p. 143)

Paul Tillich  
*The Shaking of the Foundations*

FOURTH  
PRESBY  
TERIAN  
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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WOUNDED HEALER  
February 20, 2000

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR  
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 30  
Mark 1: 40-45

*Dear God, your son reached across a wide space created by custom and culture and religion one day, and touched a man no one else would touch, and made him whole. We thank you for all the ways you touch us; with the beauty of the world and people to love and music to sing and friends to care for and a church to belong to. So now touch our minds and our hearts with your word of compassion and justice and love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

At Massachusetts General, one of the great teaching hospitals in the United States, there is an experimental program going on that is receiving a lot of national attention. In fact, it was the subject of an ABC 20/20 segment. The experiment was organized and orchestrated by the Mass General chaplains' office when the medical staff asked for help. It seems that increasingly, hospital patients, particularly those who are seriously ill and facing major surgery, were asking physicians, nurses and other hospital personnel spiritual questions—questions about God and suffering and pain and healing and death and prayer. And so a program was created to help medical personnel deal with their patients' spiritual concerns. Some patients were even asking doctors and nurses to pray with them which for most was, and is, a difficult situation. Nurse Donna McKay, who works the night shift in oncology says that it is in the evening, at night, after visiting hours, when family and friends have gone and the hospital becomes quiet and patients are alone for the first time all day, that the questions come—and the fear and the loneliness and the sense of isolation and aloneness and the requests for prayer.

An anesthesiologist told ABC's Timothy Johnson that after going through the program and becoming a little more comfortable with her own faith, she gently introduces the subject with her patients as she helps them get ready for surgery. She has learned to ask in an unobtrusive, non-threatening way, and to respect immediately the patients who do not want to talk about it. But most, she testifies, are not only surprised, but grateful to be able to express themselves religiously to a doctor and many gladly accept her offer to pray for them. ABC captured the intimacy and the power of her conversation and prayer with a woman prior to breast cancer surgery.

Hospitals all over the country are paying attention. One third of all medical schools now include courses on spirituality. At the University of Chicago, a unique program of exploring the commonalties of religion and medicine brought Divinity School and Medical School faculty and students together, under the inspiration of a wonderful Lutheran pastor-professor, Granger Westberg, who died not long ago. Westberg wrote books which became classics in the field: *Nurse, Pastor and Patient*, the inspiration for the Parish Nurse movement which is growing rapidly among American churches and a form of which, our Wellness Program, is part of Fourth Church's ministry; and *Minister and*

*Doctor Meet*, which explored the common ground shared by religion and medicine. Not all physicians, or clergy, for that matter, are enthusiastic about it, but Westberg, and chaplains' departments and creative medical school faculties and nurses who work the night shift on oncology, know that the wall between medicine and religion is crumbling; in fact should never have been there in the first place.

Health is something of a mystery. Is it the absence of sickness, the absence of physical symptoms, the absence of abnormalities? Or is it a general state of well being which includes mind and spirit as well as body? Were the Hebrews right when they used the same word "Shalom" to express peace, wholeness, well-being, health and salvation?

However you define it, health, healing, wholeness, restoration is very much at the heart of Christian faith and experience and history. In fact, it is the way the story of Jesus is introduced to us by the first account to be written, the Gospel according to Mark. In the first few paragraphs, as soon as Jesus of Nazareth gathers a few followers and begins his public ministry, he heals a man with an unclean spirit—we might say mental illness, a psychosis—then Peter's mother-in-law who gets up from her sick bed and starts to make dinner, and a man with leprosy. And it will continue. Crowds of people are searching for him wherever he goes in Galilee because of his reputation as a healer, a reputation, by the way, that he does not seem to want. He knows, apparently, the temptations which accompany a reputation as a "faith healer," a reputation so easily exploited at the expense of sick people, a lesson television faith healers have not learned.

Nevertheless, Jesus Christ is initially defined in terms of the love and compassion and power to restore human beings to wholeness and health—which sometimes means physical healing and sometimes not, which is why, ultimately, I think, he did not want to be known as a healer.

The incident in today's text is fascinating, and important. It is about the overlap between religion and medicine, the relationship between body and spirit and the love of the one who takes human pain, physical and spiritual, very seriously.

The man has leprosy—which is the word Hebrew culture used for any skin disorder, discoloration or eruption. It may have included Hansen's Disease which is the official name for modern leprosy, although some medical research indicates that Hansen's—or true leprosy—did not appear in Palestine until years later. In any event, Leprosy was important and different from other illnesses because it was both a medical problem and a religious problem.

The law defined people with leprosy as "unclean." In the Book of Leviticus, Israel's purity code is defined in detail. Generally, things that look different or abnormal are called "unclean." When you get a strange skin rash you go to the priest who takes a look and confers on you the taboo "unclean." You are thereafter banished from the community; you had to wear torn clothing, let your hair hang loose so people can see you coming and avoid you, cover your upper lip with your hand and cry out "Unclean, Unclean," whenever you approach another human being. You must live outside the community, in a cave or an empty tomb which is appropriate, because in terms of human social intercourse, your life is over. You are dead. You certainly are not going to touch or

be touched by anyone again; not your beloved, not your wife or husband, not your children or parents. Unless, that is, your symptoms somehow disappear and then you return to the priest who has another look, and if satisfied, prescribes a sacrifice and upon its completion, declares that you are now clean and fit to resume your role in the community, your life.

The law also prohibits your presence in the Synagogue and suggests that your disease is God's punishment for your sins—which makes you feel even worse. Furthermore, anyone who touches you or is touched by you is also unclean.

To the extent that whatever was physically wrong was infectious, the system was effective. Until fairly recently, the only way the world knew how to deal with infection was isolation. I grew up in a time when measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, earned you a visit from the public health department and a white quarantine sign—which announced to the world that you were sick with measles—in bed reading comic books—for days—with your mother treating you like royalty, bringing you gingerale and toast. The sign was placed prominently on the outside of your house. I always thought the whole business was pretty interesting—couldn't wait till we had our own quarantine sign which in time, of course, happened. In the middle ages, plague victims were occasionally simply put out of the house, or in some more extreme situations, placed together in a house that was boarded up.

The tragedy—the tragedy for this desperate man who comes to Jesus—is that he may not have been very sick physically. And yet he was dead.

So desperate was he that when he has the opportunity, he breaks with convention, breaks the law, approaches Jesus and asks—now notice—not to be cured of leprosy, but to be clean. What he desperately wants, what he profoundly needs, is to be restored to his family, his community, his religion, his self, his life.

And notice what Jesus does.

“If you choose—you can make me clean,” the man says. And Mark reports:  
“Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said, “I do choose. Be made clean.”

That's remarkable. Jesus breaks the law, too. Jesus is now unclean. Jesus has deliberately taken into himself the man's condition, his isolation, his illness.

And furthermore, Jesus has just done something only a priest can do, namely calling this man clean.

And most dramatically, he has reversed the sequence. The priest needs to see the absence of symptoms before he says clean.

Jesus touches a man with leprosy and says—“you're clean.” Even with your leprosy, you're clean. That's radical. In the context of his culture it is revolutionary. Jesus calls

an unclean man clean. Jesus presumes to restore to full participation in the human community a man the religious institutions kept out.

DePaul's John Dominic Crossan says:

“That act deliberately impinges the rights of society's boundary keepers and controllers. Jesus acted as an alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of society.”(*Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, p.82/83)

“Moved with pity” Jesus touched him, the text says, but many scholars are saying that's a mistranslation. What it really says is “moved with anger.” Anger at what, do you suppose? Could it be that Jesus is angry at religion that isolates, marginalizes, excludes a precious child of God; religion that gets it backwards—instead of extending hospitality, welcoming to the community—all, particularly the outcasts, religion that, in the name of the God of all, somehow concludes that its function is to exclude and isolate and marginalize? I think that made Jesus angry. I think that's why he acted so courageously. I think that's why he abrogated the boundary making principle of institutional religion and said in anger, “my boundaries are much broader, much more generous, much more hospitable, much more inclusive than yours.” And yes, I believe, the ongoing propensity of institutional religion is to do that, to exclude, to keep out, to invest institutional energy in drawing definitive boundaries, to keep out those who are different, those who, by our customs and traditions are unclean.

Jesus put this lonely, isolated man in a new place. It's called God's kingdom, where all are welcome, where no one is a stranger, where boundaries are generous and broad and full of windows and doors, for those on the outside, for whatever reason, to enter and find welcome and hospitality and acceptance and restoration and wholeness. That's what that touch meant.

It is no accident that when Jesus called him clean—the man's leprosy disappeared. As Professor Paul Tillich put it so eloquently:

“Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted . . . sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say ‘yes’ to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate, and self-contempt disappear and that our self is reunited with itself.” (*The Shaking of the Foundation*, p.162-163)

Someone noted that what Jesus did for the man with leprosy is the reason we have the church; that in touching this untouchable, this outcast, Jesus gave us a model for the church and its mission and purpose.

In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes:

“Broken things have been on my mind recently and in the lives of people I love. Our wonderful friend Ken died of AIDS—not long after, my friend, Mimi, began to die after a

long struggle with a rare blood disease . . . Our preacher, Veronica, said recently that this is life's nature: that lives and hearts get broken, those of people we love, those of people we'll never meet. She said that the world sometimes feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward and that we who are more or less OK for now, need to take the tenderest possible care of the more wounded people in the waiting room until the healer comes. You sit with people, she said, you bring them juice and graham crackers." (p. 106)

The good news is that the healer has come, the "wounded healer," to use Henri Nouwen's striking image: the one who touches the leper, the one who welcomes into the kingdom all those on the outside looking in wistfully, the lonely, the isolated, the unloved, the unwanted, the marginal, you and me when we are quarantined for whatever reason, worried, afraid, anxious, guilty, sick in body and soul—reaches out and touches us.

The good news is that the healer has come.

Jesus Christ is his name. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER**  
**February 20, 2000**  
**The Reverend Carol Allen**

Holy Lord God, source of life and light, in the beginning your breath and Spirit drew forth the world and filled the earth with your creatures. At the last, your breath shall gather us in, each in our time, to the shelter and mystery of your love. We turn to you now, trusting in your grace.

O God, the days speed by, full of details and demands. Interrupt the regular rhythm and routine of our schedules. Show us a glimpse of beauty in the world. Show us the resiliency that helps the human spirit to endure. Draw us into silence and calm when we pray. Set our thoughts on you, Heart of the Universe.

In the stillness of these moments, hear the aching of our silent sufferings and unspoken joys. May the music of this service encourage and offer us a means of expression of these. With minds cluttered and weary of making decisions, may this morning's worship offer renewal. We long to grow in you, O God. May the prayers we pray be a means both of confession and commitment.

O God, we try to be self-sufficient but fall short. We are tempted to let numbers and dollar signs become signs of success, to let entertainment take the place of worship. We try to claim your power as our power to make ourselves healthy, wealthy and wise. At these times, draw our eyes to the cross where we see your power at work raising Jesus from the dead. We remember Jesus who waited tables and washed feet, who sought not to save himself but to bring others into your caring presence, through his healing touch. Because of the power of your Spirit continuing with us in the risen Christ, you give your forgiving and affirming love in our moments of failure and loss of strength.

Through those moments when you meet us in our grief and restore us to hope, develop us into a source of healing for others. Anoint our hands to hold, reconcile and mend the broken. Bring comfort, healing and understanding to persons in our families or our communities who are ill. Be support for individuals or families facing trying times, upcoming surgery, or hard choices. May new strength well up in those who have lost a family member or friend or who have lost confidence or direction. Enter into the spirits of hurting children, O God. Remember the men and women unable to work. Watch over the elderly and all with failing strength. Use us to heal the earth tortured by misuse and greed. Bring satisfaction to those throughout the world who hunger and thirst for food or for justice. May adversaries become allies in those places engaged in conflict or victimized by war. May the building of peace become a valued calling.

We thank you, gracious God, for this congregation and for all who labor in and through it, and for your enduring loving-kindness; from womb to old age and beyond, we are carried in your strong arms; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught his follower to say together when they pray: OUR FATHER...

(sources of inspiration: Barbara Brown Taylor, Glen Rainsley and Diane Karay)